

# The Epistle of James



**Amazing Graace Lutheran Church**

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## Introduction

### AUTHOR

**James, who identifies himself as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). There are four men who bear this name in the New Testament:**

- ♦ **James, son of Zebedee and brother of John** - A fisherman called by Christ (Mt 4:17-22) who later became an apostle (Mt 10:2). Together with John, they were nicknamed "Sons of Thunder" because of their impulsiveness (cf. Mk 3:17 with Lk 9:51-56). He was killed by Herod in 44 A.D. (Ac 12:1-2).
- ♦ **James, son of Alphaeus** - Another one of the apostles (Mt 10:3; Ac 1:12), about whom very little is known. He may be "James the younger," whose mother, Mary, was among the women at Jesus' crucifixion and tomb (Mt 27:56; Mk 15:40; 16:1; Lk 24:10). In Jn 19:25, this Mary is called the wife of Cleophas, perhaps to be identified with Alphaeus.
- ♦ **James, father of Judas the apostle** - Even more obscure, one of the few references to him is Lk 6:16.
- ♦ **James, the brother of our Lord** - A half-brother of our Lord (Mt 13:55), who did not believe in his brother at first (Jn 7:5). He became a disciple following the resurrection (1 Co 15:7; Ac 1:14) and gained prominence in the church at Jerusalem (Ga 2:9). As evidence of his prominence, Peter sent him a special message following his own release from prison (Ac 12:17). James also played an important role in the conference at Jerusalem (Ac 15:13-33), and Paul brought him greetings upon arriving at Jerusalem (Ac 21:18-19).

**"James, the Lord's brother" (Ga 1:19)** is most likely the author of this epistle. Tradition describes James as a man of prayer, which may explain the emphasis on prayer in his letter. It was said that he prayed so much, his knees were as hard as those on a camel. He was martyred in 62 A.D., either by being cast down from the temple, or beaten to death with clubs. It is reported that as he died, he prayed as did Jesus, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

### RECIPIENTS

The epistle is addressed to "the twelve tribes which are scattered among the nations" (1:1). This naturally leads one to think of Jews (Ac 26:6-7) living outside the land of Palestine. Since the

Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, many Jews were scattered throughout different nations (**Ac 2:5-11**). While Jews, the epistle makes it clear that they were also brothers in the Lord, i.e., they were **Jewish Christians**. Nineteen times James calls them "brothers" and at least one time he definitely means those who were brothers "in the Lord" (**2:1**).

It appears many of these Jewish Christians were poor and oppressed. Being Jews, they would often be rejected by the Gentiles. As Jewish Christians, they would also be rejected by many of their own countrymen. The letter indicates that most were poor, and some were being oppressed by the rich (**2:6-7**). Because it was not addressed to a single church or individual, it has been categorized a "General" or "catholic" (universal) epistle along with 1 and 2 Peter, 1 John, and Jude.

## **TIME AND PLACE OF WRITING**

With no mention of the Jerusalem conference recorded in Acts 15 (A.D. 49), **A.D. 48-50** is the date commonly given for this epistle. This would make it the first book of the New Testament written. If James, the Lord's brother, is the author, then he probably wrote it in **Jerusalem**.

## **PURPOSE OF THE EPISTLE**

The epistle deals with a variety of themes, with an emphasis upon practical aspects of the Christian life. Some of the subjects include handling trials and temptations, practicing pure religion, understanding the relation between faith and works, the proper use of the tongue and display of true wisdom, being a friend of God rather than a friend of the world, and the value of humility, patience and prayer.

While these may appear unrelated, they are crucial to the growth and development of the Christian. For this reason, I suggest that James' purpose was:

### **TO INSTRUCT CHRISTIANS CONCERNING TRUE AND PRACTICAL RELIGION**

In this epistle is a call to be doers of the Word, manifesting a living faith through one's works. In 108 verses, there are 54 imperatives (commands), prompting some to call James "the Amos of the New Testament."

## **The Reading of the Epistle**

# James 1:1-8

## Consider trials to be a blessing

*(The People's Bible, James; 1,2 Peter; 1,2,3 John; Jude, pages 3-14)*

### Look

Verse 1      *"To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations"*—James is writing to Jewish Christians who had been scattered by persecution. Most acknowledge that the writer of this epistle was James, the brother of the Lord (Galatians 1:19).

### Discuss

1. The Christians to whom James is writing are suffering persecution. How should Christians think about persecution?
2. Think through the phrase "the testing of your faith develops perseverance." Explain the process that James is talking about.
3. In the face of what James says about considering persecution to be a blessing, we might wonder if we are up to it. What encouragement does James give us in verse 5?
4. We ask for wisdom because we are weak and don't see things clearly. God will not hold this against us and will give us what we ask. There is something, however, that will keep us from receiving wisdom. What is that?

### Apply

5. Read Romans 5:3-5 and 1 Peter 1:6-9. You have heard people say that there is a silver lining around every cloud. Why is this especially true for the trials that Christians endure for their faith?

*James encourages us to go through trials with a spirit of joy. And if we need wisdom to do this, we should ask God for wisdom. But we must never waver between faith that God will help us and unbelief that doubts God's love and care.*

# James 1:9-18

## Good gifts, not temptations, come from the Lord

*(The People's Bible, James; 1,2 Peter; 1,2,3 John; Jude, pages 14-17)*

### Look

Verse 18      *"A kind of firstfruits"*—The Israelites offered the first portion of their produce, the "fruit" of their fields and vineyards, to the Lord. Christians are like those firstfruits. Out of all the other produce (here, God's entire creation), we are given to him to be his own.

### Discuss

1. In what should the humble take pride? In what should the rich take pride?
2. In verse 12, James offers more encouragement to those who are suffering. How does he encourage us?
3. The temptations to deny one's faith in trials, to doubt God, and to take pride in riches are part of a Christian's life. But when Christians see these temptations come into their lives, they are tempted to commit yet another sin. What is that?
4. James points out what comes from the Lord. What temptations does this fact help us combat?

### Apply

5. Into which of the two classes of people listed in verses 9-11 do most people in the United States fall? If you fall into this category, of what can you be proud?
6. Some say that God's Word is a dead letter and that only the Holy Spirit can give us spiritual life and wisdom. React to that on the basis of verse 18.

*James continues to teach about temptation. He helps the rich and the poor focus on the most important thing. He reminds us of God's blessings, and he teaches where sin comes from.*

# James 1:19-27

## Listening and doing

*(The People's Bible, James; 1,2 Peter; 1,2,3 John; Jude, pages 19-21)*

### Look

Verse 25      *"The perfect law that gives freedom"*—James is obviously referring to God's Word as a whole, as he did in verses 21 and 22. The message of Christ alone gives us freedom. Recall how God's laws to his Old Testament people were filled with pictures of the coming Savior. The gospel message, embedded as it was in the very ceremonies and laws that made up the Old Covenant, freed the people to love and serve God. That law freed the people to let the law guide and shape their lives and to be obedient to Christ. Remember, James is speaking as an Old Testament believer. He confesses that the law is fulfilled in Christ and that Christ is the Savior of all. But he and his people still use the Old Testament as their Scripture. Accordingly, the term *law* refers to both God's gospel promises (verse 21) and his will, this is, the law in the narrow sense (verse 22).

### Discuss

1. Why is being quick to listen and slow to speak a great help in controlling anger?
2. There is a difference between righteous anger and human, sinful anger. Which is James speaking about in verse 20?
3. How should we live our lives? Note the positive and the negative encouragement.
4. See the "Look" section. How do we look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom?
5. James gives three examples of true religion. What are they?

### Apply

6. Agree or disagree. Our society offers more opportunity for moral filth than other times in history.

*James tells us to listen to God's Word and to do what it says, showing love and self-discipline.*

# James 2:1-13

## Do not show favoritism

*(The People's Bible, James; 1,2 Peter; 1,2,3 John; Jude, pages 23-26)*

### Look

Verse 12      *“As those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom”—*  
James is referring to the whole of God’s Word. In the New Testament, we are free from our sins—in Christ. We have risen with Christ and now live with him in service to God. “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?” the writer to the Hebrews asks (2:3). We are not going to be judged by God’s promises. But we will be judged on the basis of whether we have accepted them or rejected them as evidenced by our lives.

### Discuss

1. In verse 4, James tells us not to become “judges with evil thoughts.” Explain what he means by that. (verses 1-4)
2. Rich versus poor. The problem existed in James’ day. James looks at both groups of people and “equalizes” them. How does he exalt the poor and humble the rich? Also read what Paul says about Christians in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.
3. How do the words “love your neighbor as yourself” help us solve the problem of favoritism?
4. What is wrong with favoritism, that is, what law does it break?
5. What does James mean when he says that mercy triumphs over judgment?

### Apply

6. Think of several reasons why Christians could fall into the trap of paying more attention to a rich person who comes to worship, rather than to a poor person.

*James warns his readers against showing favoritism against the poor.*

# James 2:14-26

## Faith without deeds is dead

*(The People's Bible, James; 1,2 Peter; 1,2,3 John; Jude, pages 27-30)*

### Look

Verse 14      *“Such faith”*—In this section James is clearly warning his readers against thinking that they can have faith but no deeds. Such faith is an imagined faith. Faith will produce works out of love for Christ. Faith without works is dead.

Verse 23      *“The scripture was fulfilled.”* God had already declared that Abraham was justified by what he did. God’s verdict on Abraham was fulfilled in the sense that Abraham put on display the faith that justified him. God and everyone around Abraham saw visible proof of his invisible faith. This statement alone proves that James is not teaching salvation by works.

### Discuss

1. Describe the kind of faith the writer condemns in verses 14-17.
2. Some claim to believe in God, but they bring forth no fruit in their lives. What is the chief characteristic of that kind of belief?
3. Review the story of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac. Read God’s response to Abraham in Genesis 22:11-18. What role did Abraham’s works play in God fulfilling his promises to Abraham? How does this help us understand James’ statement in verse 24?
4. After using Rahab as another example of a person whose faith was displayed by her actions, James concludes his discussion. How do his words in verse 26 support everything we have said so far about what James means by faith?

### Apply

5. A Christian friend just finished reading the book of James and is bothered by his statements on faith and works. Practice explaining to your friend what we have learned in this lesson.

*James refutes those who claim to have faith, but have no works. Such faith is not faith at all.*



# James 3:1-12

## Taming the tongue

*(The People's Bible, James; 1,2 Peter; 1,2,3 John; Jude, pages 31-34)*

### Look

Verse 1      *“Will be judged more strictly”*—See Hebrews 13:17 and 1 Timothy 3:1-3 for additional information on the high position of a Christian teacher. To whom much is given, much will be expected. Those who teach others and then commit the same errors will be chastened more severely.

### Discuss

1. If you keep your tongue in check, what are you also able to do?
2. Why do you think James brings up the matter of teaching, urging people to think twice before they strive to teach others?
3. James uses three pictures in verses 3-6 to describe the power of the tongue. What are they, and what point does James make by using each one?
4. This side of heaven, what can a person never fully do?

### Apply

5. In the final verses of this section, James strikes a contrast in how we use our tongues. In one breath we praise God, and in the next breath we curse our fellowman. Think of one Sunday when you praised God in church but then went home and used your tongue to gossip or even curse another person.
6. Why is it important that those who teach the Word also spend much time in the Word before they speak? Read 2 Timothy 2:15 and discuss the essential requirement for a teacher of the Word.

*James urges us to use our tongues for God's glory, not for our own sinful pleasures.*

# James 3:13-18

## Two kinds of wisdom

*(The People's Bible, James; 1,2 Peter; 1,2,3 John; Jude, pages 34,35)*

### Discuss

1. What does James mean by “wise and understanding?” (verse 13) Look at the following verses, and read how wisdom is described in other places of Scripture.  
2 Timothy 3:15  
1 Corinthians 1:18-30  
Ephesians 1:17  
Ephesians 5:15 and following
2. Why does wisdom make a person humble?
3. In verses 14 and 15, James describes another kind of wisdom. What is that? Why do you think he calls it wisdom?
4. What is one reason that the devil's wisdom is foolishness?
5. True wisdom comes from God. What is that wisdom like? Choose one characteristic you would like more of and discuss this with the class. Pray that the Lord gives you more of that characteristic of true wisdom.

### Apply

6. Some people are not happy unless they are in control of others, whatever the situation might be. Read verse 17 again. What traits will manifest themselves in the Christian who has been given the true wisdom that comes from above?
7. Peacemakers bring about a “harvest of righteousness.” What does Jesus say about peacemakers in Matthew 5:9?

*James describes true wisdom. He warns us against following Satan's wisdom.*

# James 4:1-10

## Be friends of God, not of the world

*(The People's Bible, James; 1,2 Peter; 1,2,3 John; Jude, pages 37-41)*

### Look

Verse 5      *"The spirit . . . envies intensely."* God is jealous when we give our allegiance to other gods.

### Discuss

1. In verses 1 and 2, James speaks about desires that battle within us. Someone has said, "Battles within give rise to battles without." Explain.
2. Earlier James said that every good and perfect gift comes from God in heaven. Those who think otherwise will soon experience God putting a stop to their wicked ways. Four times James says that those who allow their lusts to shape their lives will not receive what they want, the implication being that God is putting a roadblock in their way. Use the blanks to identify James' four statements.

You want something

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You kill and covet, but

---

You do not have

---

When you ask, you do not receive

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3. The entire syndrome James described in verses 1-3 is summarized in verse 4. What does a person become who follows the pattern of these verses?
4. Although the new spirit God created in us is envious when we serve our sinful nature, God promises his grace. To whom?

### Apply

5. What is the application of all this? (verses 7-10)
6. How does the Lord's Prayer help keep us from lusting for things?

*When lust rules our hearts, we find ourselves quarrelling and fighting for what we are lusting after. But when we submit to God, repent of our sins, and rely on him, he will exalt us.*

# James 4:11-17

## Don't judge your brother; submit to God's will

*(The People's Bible, James; 1,2 Peter; 1,2,3 John; Jude, pages 41-44)*

### Discuss

Verse 17 Here James gives a general admonition. In the context of this section, James is admonishing us to place our lives in the Lord's hands and acknowledge his plans for us. Now that we know we should do that, it would be a sin not to.

### Discuss

1. James says that if we slander our brother or speak against him, we are speaking against the law and judging it. In order to understand this thought, we must realize exactly what we are doing when we judge someone else. What are we saying about that person and especially about ourselves in relation to that person?
2. Continue the thought of question 1. If I, a sinner, claim to have the right to use the law to judge someone else, how am I misusing the law and passing judgment on it?
3. Who alone is able to use the law to judge someone else?
4. With what attitude should we make our plans?
5. Why is it boasting and bragging not to humbly acknowledge that God directs our lives?

### Apply

6. The Bible is filled with examples of human beings judging other human beings in a legitimate and God-pleasing way. For an example, see 1 Corinthians 5:1-5. What is the difference between God-pleasing judgment and the sinful judgment James condemns?
7. How might you better acknowledge the Lord when you make plans or set goals?

*James warns us against putting ourselves over God's law and judging others on the basis of our seeming holiness. He tells us to acknowledge God's will when we make our plans.*

# James 5:1-11

## A warning against rich oppressors; be patient in suffering

*(The People's Bible, James; 1,2 Peter; 1,2,3 John; Jude, pages 44-49)*

### Discuss

1. The rich are tempted to rejoice in their riches. James says they should weep and wail. Why?
2. James is giving wealth a voice and putting words into its mouth. How will rotting and decaying wealth testify against the rich person?
3. James makes some very pointed statements. What is so ironic about the wealthy person hoarding wealth in the last days? (verse 3) A couple verses later, James makes an equally ironic statement, "You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter" (verse 5). What does he mean by this?
4. It is clear that James is talking about Christians who have fallen from faith or who are very near falling from faith. How does this become clear in verses 4-6?
5. James now turns to those who are being exploited. What encouragement does he give us?

### Apply

6. Do James' words in verses 1-3 have special application to modern-day America?
7. Read Deuteronomy 24:19. How does the Lord's concern for the needy and helpless guide the Christian businessperson who is also concerned about "the bottom line"?

*James warns the rich against oppressing their employees and encourages the suffering person to be patient.*

# James 5:12-20

## A warning against swearing; the power of prayer

*(The People's Bible, James; 1,2 Peter; 1,2,3 John; Jude, pages 47-53)*

### Look

Verse 14      *"Anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord."* We don't have space here to describe the possible ways to interpret this phrase. See The People's Bible commentary on James, pages 51 and 52, for a good overview.

### Discuss

1. Why does a person who swears imply that he or she is not trustworthy?
2. What is the answer to trouble? What is the right response to blessings?
3. In our day, sickness is often dealt with in a rather clinical way, setting the illness apart from the spiritual life of the sick person. How does James advise God's people to deal with sickness? Focus on the following words:

"Elders"

"Prayer"

"Confession"

"Forgiveness"

4. What encouragement can we draw from the story of Elijah?

### Apply

5. Why are the last two verses in the book of James a fitting conclusion to this very practical book for Christian living? How do they summarize what our attitude should be?

*We are not to swear to prove how trustworthy we are. We are to use prayer, especially as we help the sick in their time of trouble. We are to strive to lead others to repentance and faith.*